

Horizon 2018: **Toward Stronger Support of French-language Learning in British Columbia**

Canadians living in British Columbia face major challenges in accessing Francophone schools and French immersion programs.

In this report, the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages chose to focus on accessing French first-language and French second-language education in British Columbia because the province is a typical case in which francophone schools and French immersion programs face significant challenges. These challenges, however, are not unique to B.C. and the lessons learned in this report can also be applied in other jurisdictions. The current report builds on the committee's 2015 report called *Aiming Higher: Increasing bilingualism of our Canadian youth*.

- ▶ The case of *École Rose-des-vents*, of which the committee heard in its study, is an example of the unmet need to support francophone schools in British Columbia. Structurally inadequate and overpopulated, **350 STUDENTS** are already packed into a **SPACE MEANT FOR 200**. ◀

What's more, it is estimated that approximately 1,200 children in the school's large catchment area could have the legal right to receive French first-language education and enroll in this school. Transportation is also an issue as some students also face unreasonable travel times.

The parents' association of *École Rose-des-vents*, the *Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique* and the *Fédération des parents francophones de la Colombie-Britannique* have been fighting lengthy and costly court battles with the provincial government to address the above mentioned issues.

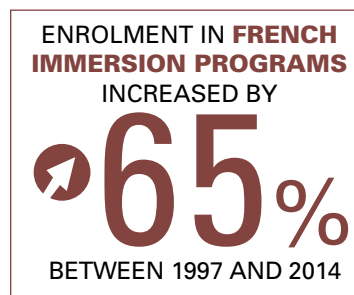
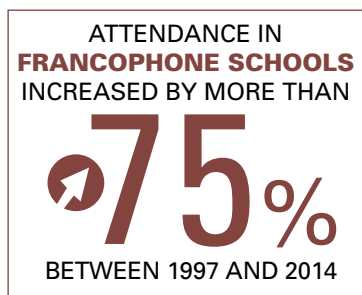
The Rose-des-vents case remains unresolved even after the Supreme Court of Canada upheld, in 2015, francophone parents' rights to have their children receive instruction in French and obtain equivalent educational experience to that provided to their counterparts in schools of the majority. The Supreme Court of British Columbia handed down a ruling in September 2016 recognizing systemic problems with the funding of French first-language education. Some aspects of the Court's decision have been appealed.

With regards to French immersion programs, B.C. parents who do not have constitutionally-guaranteed rights but who want their children to receive French second-language education also face barriers. Waitlists and lottery systems, the lack of nearby schools, a shortage of qualified teachers and the lack of postsecondary opportunities in French are some of the barriers to those wanting to attend French immersion programs.

The committee feels its report is particularly timely because the *Protocol for Agreements for Minority-Language Education and Second-Language Instruction* is up for renegotiation in 2018. It is an opportunity for the federal and provincial governments to prove they are serious about addressing the inadequacies present in British Columbia and across the country. The next multi-year official languages plan will also be announced in 2018.

The conclusions and recommendations of the committee's report apply to francophone schools, French immersion programs and British Columbia's French-speaking community at large, including francophones and francophiles, and the support they are entitled to.

For example, francophone minorities living in predominantly anglophone provinces have the right under section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* to have their children receive instruction in French, subject to certain criteria. In B.C., it is estimated that only 25% to 30% of rights holders are enrolled in francophone schools. That said, the demand exists and attendance in B.C. francophone schools has increased by 75% in the last 20 years.



Part VII of the *Official Languages Act* describes the federal government's commitment to fostering the full recognition and use of both official languages in Canada. The federal government must therefore support the learning of English and French, Canada's two official languages, across the country. In B.C., the demand for French immersion programs has grown by 65% in the last 20 years, but there still remains a lack of spaces for students enrolled in primary and secondary schools relative to the demand.

Part VII also provides for supporting the development of the English and French linguistic minority communities in Canada. The federal government has a responsibility to enhance the vitality of B.C.'s francophone community but it has not increased its financial support to B.C. community organizations in more than 15 years.

The committee believes the federal government is not providing the needed support. The committee observed a strong desire from francophones and francophiles alike to obtain French-language instruction and services.

- ▶ The committee heard from **55 WITNESSES** in public hearings and met **MORE THAN 150 PEOPLE** during on-site visits. ◀

Unfortunately, the government of British Columbia declined to take part in this study, making it difficult for the committee to work with the province to identify practical solutions to increase learning opportunities in French, one of Canada's official languages.

The committee also heard from the Minister of Public Services and Procurement and the Canada Lands Company. The committee strongly encourages the Canada Lands Company to recognize its obligations under Part VII of the *Official Languages Act* in acquiring urgently-needed sites for building two francophone schools. The Minister of Public Services and Procurement, while appearing before the committee, said that her department would work with all stakeholders in finding a solution and participate in the ongoing discussions.

Students, in particular, left an indelible impression on members of the committee during the fact-finding mission and public hearings. They spoke of a desire not just for education but also for opportunities to be part of a strong francophone community outside of their school and to live in French in B.C.

These young people are engaged but they have few opportunities to expand their learning of or receive services in French. This, despite the Commissioner of Official Languages' recommendations in 2009 to create a continuum of second-language learning opportunities, a finding repeated in the previous committee's report tabled in 2015. An education continuum, from early childhood to post-secondary, as well as a continuum of services in French are again both highlighted as key findings in this report.

- ▶ The committee makes **17 RECOMMENDATIONS** in this report that, if implemented, would begin to narrow the gulf between the rights of Canadian citizens and the narrow band of services in the language of their choice that is available to them. ◀

The committee believes that the federal government must make a conscious and long-term effort to provide the support to which it is committed under the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and under the *Official Languages Act*. Access to French first- and second-language programs in British Columbia is still out of reach for many. The committee will continue to hold the federal government to account so that it meets its official languages obligations.

- ▶ **This year, Canada is celebrating the 150th anniversary of Confederation and 2019 will mark the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the *Official Languages Act*. There could be no more appropriate time for the federal government to commit to promoting Canada's two official languages, which are at the core of the Canadian identity.** ◀

► Recommendation 1

That the Minister of Public Services and Procurement:

- (a) intervene with Canada Lands Company Ltd., engaging with British Columbia's Ministry of Education and the City of Vancouver to advocate for the need of the *Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique* in Vancouver, west of Main Street, to promptly acquire lands that are currently 50% owned by Canada Lands Company Ltd. to build two schools that will meet the needs of Vancouver's francophone community; and
- (b) adopt regulations requiring federal institutions to take into account the interests and needs of official language minority schools in the sale or transfer of real and personal property, by 2018.

► Recommendation 2

That the Minister of Canadian Heritage, in negotiating the new Protocol for Agreements on Education and the next multi-year official languages plan, conclude a special agreement with British Columbia's Ministry of Education to respond to the pressing infrastructure needs of the francophone community and guarantee the recognition of its rights under section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and Part VII of the *Official Languages Act*.

► Recommendation 3

That the Minister of Canadian Heritage launch, by 2018, a national awareness and promotion campaign on both the merits of a French education and an education continuum, from early childhood through post-secondary, building on the full respect of rights guaranteed by section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

► Recommendation 4

That the Minister of Canadian Heritage take steps to support the education continuum as regards:

- (a) support for linguistic and cultural identity building for francophone students; and
- (b) retention of students in the francophone school system, throughout their education.

► Recommendation 5

- 5.1 That the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, in collaboration with British Columbia's Ministry of Children and Family Development and in consultation with the francophone community:
 - (a) include a francophone vision in its national framework on early learning and child care; and
 - (b) commit to increasing access and funding to early childhood services in French, by 2018.
- 5.2 That the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development take similar steps with corresponding ministries in all provinces and territories with similar situations.

► Recommendation 6

- 6.1 That the Minister of Canadian Heritage, in collaboration with the Ministry of Advanced Education and in consultation with post-secondary institutions, commit to increasing access and funding to additional French-language programs in post-secondary institutions, by 2018.
- 6.2 That the Minister of Canadian Heritage take similar steps with corresponding ministries in all provinces and territories with similar situations.

► Recommendation 7

That the federal government, in consultation with official language minority communities:

- (a) strongly encourage Statistics Canada to design and test new questions on school attendance in preparation for the 2021 census which would allow for the full implementation of minority language educational rights guaranteed in section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*; and
- (b) provide the necessary resources to Statistics Canada to conduct a new survey on the vitality of official-language minorities as part of its next multi-year official languages plan.

► Recommendation 8

That the Minister of Canadian Heritage work with the provincial and territorial governments and consult with language organizations, school boards and teachers to establish a specific, measurable objective to increase official-language proficiency among Canadians, particularly youth aged 15 to 19, by 2018.

► Recommendation 9

That the Minister of Canadian Heritage launch, by 2018, a public national awareness and promotion campaign on the merits of bilingualism that builds on the full respect of obligations in Part VII of the *Official Languages Act*.

► Recommendation 10

That the Minister of Canadian Heritage work with the provincial and territorial governments to establish a common Canadian framework of reference for languages that includes common reference levels for language teaching, learning and evaluation in Canada, by 2018.

► Recommendation 11

That the Minister of Canadian Heritage, in collaboration with British Columbia's Ministry of Education:

- (a) ensure access everywhere and for everyone to French immersion programs in British Columbia;
- (b) commit to increased and sustained funding for these programs; and
- (c) meet growing demand by retaining students, throughout their education.

► Recommendation 12

12.1 That the Minister of Canadian Heritage and the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship in collaboration with British Columbia's Minister of Education ensure that French-speaking immigrants are well informed on the opportunities to access French-language education in the province.

12.2 That the Minister of Canadian Heritage and the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship take similar steps with corresponding ministries in all provinces and territories with similar situations.

► Recommendation 13

That the Minister of Canadian Heritage, in negotiating the next Protocol for Agreements on Education, enter into a separate tripartite protocol on minority-language education that:

- (a) gives a voice to francophone communities, through their school boards, in the management of funds allocated for French first-language education; and
- (b) brings federal government practices in line with section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and Part VII of the *Official Languages Act*.

► Recommendation 14

That the Minister of Canadian Heritage, in negotiating the next Protocol for Agreements on Education:

- (a) undertake to include more stringent provisions on money invested in federal–provincial/territorial agreements; and
- (b) undertake field validations to follow up on the activity and financial reports received from the Ministries of Education in the provinces and territories, as recommended by the Commissioner of Official Languages.

► Recommendation 15

That the Minister of Canadian Heritage, in negotiating the new Protocol for Agreements on Education and the next multi-year official languages plan, commit to increasing the envelope for Intergovernmental Cooperation on Education, for example by providing:

- (a) support for school infrastructure and school transportation in francophone schools;
- (b) support for post-secondary institutions to provide basic training and continuing education for French teachers; and
- (c) language and cultural exchanges and authentic experiences for students enrolled in French first-language and French second-language education, as well as for teachers.

► Recommendation 16

That the Minister of Canadian Heritage, in the next multi-year official languages plan:

- (a) commit to increasing the envelope for Cooperation with the Community Sector, especially with regard to support for community spaces in French; and
- (b) consult the francophone community in British Columbia, including organizations representing francophone youth and early childhood, to determine whether changes to cooperation arrangements are needed to meet their needs.

► Recommendation 17

That the Minister of Canadian Heritage, in negotiating the new federal–provincial/territorial agreements on minority language services and the next multi-year official languages plan, commit to increasing the envelope for Intergovernmental Cooperation on Services.